

Fresno Bee

House bill could breathe life into California high-speed rail

By Michael Doyle / Bee Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON -- The House on Wednesday boosted California's prospects for a high-speed passenger rail system that eventually could serve the San Joaquin Valley.

Expensive and ambitious, California's high-speed rail program is still in its infancy. But as part of a rail transportation bill with wide bipartisan appeal, the House included a \$1.75 billion grant program designed to help high-speed rail get rolling nationwide.

"This measure will give a big shot in the arm to assist California," said Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, adding that high-speed rail "will be a state-of-the-art system we will depend on."

The House bill provides \$350 million annually for high-speed rail projects through the year 2013. States and groups of states could apply for grants to build rail corridors served by trains that travel at least 110 mph.

The funding inevitably will attract stiff competition, and the bill does not specifically cite California as a guaranteed recipient. The Transportation Department must select projects that "generate national economic benefits" and "reduce congestion," among other criteria. The bill further requires "stable and dependable" funding from nonfederal sources.

In November, Californians will vote on a \$9.95 billion bond measure that would help build the high-speed system connecting Los Angeles and San Francisco via the San Joaquin Valley. The state still will require federal funding for one-third of the total project cost, according to the California High Speed Rail Authority.

"This is sorely needed," Costa said.

California rail officials have estimated they might need upward of \$40 billion to complete the planned high-speed rail project.

Skeptics suggest the costs inevitably will rise even higher on a project whose benefits may be elusive.

"High-speed rail in California is a very difficult proposition, because you have to go through and around the mountains," David Levinson, an assistant professor of transportation engineering at the University of Minnesota, noted in an interview Wednesday.

Levinson, who has studied the California high-speed proposals, added that "even if they got approval this year, it will still take years and years to build."

He suggested high-speed rail might make more sense in a congested region like the Northeast.

But Quentin Kopp, chairman of the California High-Speed Rail Authority, said in an interview Wednesday that the House action was a "financial recognition" of the imminence of high-speed rail development.

"It certainly advances the California high-speed rail project," Kopp said.